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SUBJECT: MDC OFFICIAL ON POSITIVE DEVELOPMENTS, CHALLENGES
TO PARTY

Classified By: Ambassador Christopher W. Dell under Section 1.5 b/d

1. (C) SUMMARY: MDC Secretary for Presidential Affairs Gandhi Mudzingwa on December 15 updated poloff on MDC priorities and activities in the run-up to the March parliamentary elections. He identified steps ZANU-PF had taken that were leading to a more open political environment, but said the progress to date was insufficient and that the MDC faced a dilemma as a result: how to exploit these new opportunities without conceding their participation in the elections. He reported that Nigerian President Obasanjo recently told opposition leader Morgan Tsvangirai that he would engage South African President

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Mbeki and Mauritius President Berenger about Zimbabwe and favored a negotiated settlement. Mudzingwa also said that Tsvangirai did not want to put off a visit to Washington

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until February, when he may need to be immersed in campaigning, but recognized the need for flexibility. END SUMMARY

The Dilemma of Opening Political Space

2. Mudzingwa noted that the regime's moderating public tone was being matched by some opening of political space:

-- He confirmed previous reports that the party generally was more successful in getting its public political gatherings approved by the police nationally, although significant problems remained. (Note: A few days later, police denied approval for major MDC meetings in Harare and Chitungwiza and police broke up a meeting Tsvangirai was holding in Masvingo. End note.)

-- In many areas, police were enforcing the law in a less obviously partisan manner. Police had arrested 18-20 ZANU-PF perpetrators of violence during the last six to eight months, an unprecedented level of enforcement against the ruling party at the local level. Mudzingwa asserted that at least a couple of ZANU-PF partisans had been convicted and other prosecutions were going forward. (Note: The vast majority of those arrested for political violence over the past few years have been MDC members but, like those ZANU-PF members arrested over that period, detainees usually had charges dropped, were acquitted, or were released upon payment of a fine. End note.)

-- The GOZ had not withheld food or other assistance on a partisan basis "for months." (Note: A visiting team from Human Right Watch told poloff last week that the organization had been unable to confirm any reports of the GOZ using food as a "weapon" since the first half of the year. End note.)

-- The MDC was having a greater impact in Parliament. The ruling party still controlled the legislative agenda but was exhibiting more inclination to compromise.

-- In this vein, ZANU-PF had agreed to some (not all) potentially significant compromises on the election bill, including one provision that would require opposition parties to get access to the state media.

-- Minister for State Security Goche had told MDC Shadow Minister for Youth Affairs Nelson Chamisa that "a decision had been taken" to permit the independent daily newspaper, The Daily News (TDN), to publish again. (Note: Publisher Strive Masiyiwa three days later reportedly sold TDN to the newspaper's management team, headed by Editor Sam Nkomo. End note.)

-- The party leadership was pleasantly surprised that Tsvangirai retained his passport and ability to travel --

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an important asset for a party. (Note: The GOZ had seized Tsvangirai's passport in connection with his first treason

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trial, preventing his international travel for over a year. Upon his acquittal the GOZ returned the passport and so far has opted not to retain it during the pre-trial portion of his second treason trial. End note.)

13. (C) Mudzingwa stressed that these positive developments cumulatively did not come close to giving the MDC a fair chance in March. The MDC thus faced a dilemma: how to exploit the new opportunities that had opened up without conceding MDC participation in the elections. The party had yet to decide whether to participate and was hoping for more concessions but any public acknowledgement of progress, however insufficient, risked giving ZANU-PF and SADC additional ammunition in their efforts to depict the elections as free and fair. The dilemma was vexing party tacticians. Mudzingwa said the party, for example, had not planned a media campaign yet, although it would be able to "within days" once a decision had been taken to pursue one. (Note: We have been unable to confirm a Washington Times report on December 21 that the state-controlled Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation had recently refused to air MDC campaign advertising. End note.)

Key Factors for MDC : Community Empowerment ...

14. (C) Mudzingwa said that a key to electoral success for the MDC lay in empowering communities -- giving citizens a sense that they could act politically without retribution. Whether the opposition would re-enter the election race would hinge on several factors all of which boiled down to one thing: the political will of the ruling party to let the MDC connect with the electorate. For instance, while the opposition was demanding the repeal of repressive legislation it recognized that more important in the short term was how the GOZ applied the laws. He claimed that MDC Secretary-General Welshman Ncube and Justice Minister

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Patrick Chinamasa had discussed a practical accommodation, which would permit each side to go forward without losing face. Mudzingwa added that voter education and "peace committees," which would mediate between the parties at local and national levels, were also potentially critical to community empowerment.

... And GOZ-ZANU-PF Separation

15. (C) Another central issue for the MDC in weighing a return to the race would be the extent to which state machinery could be divorced from ruling party control. Having the GOZ resources behind ruling party efforts, including the impunity for ruling party violence, was a huge practical and psychological obstacle for the MDC, particularly in the rural hinterland. The GOZ's use of food and other official largesse for political advantage may have lessened but still presented a problem for the election environment. The GOZ was, for instance, now taking its limited largesse and distributing broadly it in key districts to reinforce the message that the ruling party was delivering the goods.

Obasanjo Engagement

16. (C) Reporting on Tsvangirai's mid-December trip to Nigeria, Mudzingwa said President Obasanjo had undertaken to approach South African President Mbeki and Mauritius President Berenger about the Zimbabwe situation. According to Mudzingwa, Obasanjo said he wanted to see a "political solution" not a "legislative one" in Zimbabwe. This meant some negotiated interim arrangement, an approach that was acceptable to Tsvangirai. However, the MDC doubted the ruling ZANU-PF party's political will to reach such a negotiated solution. Obasanjo and Tsvangirai agreed that a greater degree of tolerance between the parties and more open political space would be primary factors in generating progress in Zimbabwe.

Tsvangirai's Washington Visit

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17. (C) Turning to Tsvangirai's planned visit to Washington, Mudzingwa advised that the Tsvangirai's calendar revolved around the elections, a date for which had yet to be announced. If it were scheduled in the first two weeks of March, Tsvangirai may be compelled to remain on the campaign trail in Zimbabwe throughout February and would then prefer to visit Washington in late January. That said, he understood the scheduling challenges posed by inauguration and other Washington priorities and would

remain as flexible as possible; the Washington visit was a high party priority.

Comment

18. (C) The MDC cannot have its cake and eat it too: to retain credibility with the electorate and in the region, it will have to hazard pursuing the limited opportunities presented by the GOZ, even if that would superficially bolster the ruling party's case for legitimacy with SADC. The opposition's dilemma alludes to a related USG policy challenge: is there a point at which our leverage and credibility will be served by acknowledging positive GOZ gestures while maintaining credible pressure for further meaningful change?

DELL